

## **Implications of Colonial Settlements on Inter Ethnic Relations: Case Study of Sabon Gari Kano**

**Dr. A. F. Usman**  
Department of History  
Usmanu Danfodiyo University  
Sokoto-Nigeria

### ***Introduction***

Although the history of the Sabon Garii system in Northern Nigeria has received attention from scholars, there are issues about the settlement which have not yet been articulated. What is usually forgotten is how the interrelation among different groups in the settlement can be used to understand certain issues relating to ethnic problems in contemporary Nigeria. The causes of the inter-ethnic conflicts in some Northern Nigerian cities where Sabon Gari exists can be best appreciated with an analysis of the history of the settlement. When Kano for example was established, certain factors, namely common market, division of labour, religious practices, and cultural gatherings bound the settlers together. These factors allowed friendly interactions between different groups. However, conflicts later became a common feature amongst the communities.

### ***Establishment and Early Settlement***

It is not the intention of this paper to discuss how and why the Sabon Gari system in Northern Nigeria was established by the colonial state in the early part of the 20th century. Sabon Gari dates back to 1913 when it was settled for the veterans of the West African Frontier Force (WAFF) and the labourers who worked on the Lagos-Kano railway line. Between 1913 and 1918, approximately 320 plots were carved out and developed to accommodate immigrant groups most of whom were railway workers in Kano.<sup>ii</sup> Large scale migration and settlement started after World War I for a number of reasons among which are the groundnut boom, the proliferation of imperialist firms, and the development of a number of administrative departments in Kano Native Authority. Between the 1920 and 1945, immigrants of different backgrounds settled in Sabon Gari; and the manner of their interaction was influenced by place of origin, religion, profession, and economic status.

### ***The Yoruba as the Earliest Settlers***

The earliest settlers in Sabon Gari Kano were the Yorubas<sup>iii</sup> who arrived in Kano immediately after the colonial conquest in 1903. Most of these Yorubas initially worked either in the railway department, the Colonial Civil Service, or the imperialist commercial companies.<sup>iv</sup> Increasing economic opportunities in the 1920s attracted more Yoruba immigrants to the settlement. Of the 2,000 persons in Sabon Gari in 1921, 1,478 were Yorubas.<sup>v</sup> Most of these Yorubas were independent traders whose chief activity was either groundnut buying or running motor transport during the dry season.<sup>vi</sup> The number of the Yoruba traders increased in the 1930s because of the intensification of trading activities by the European companies and the subsequent expansion of the Sabon Gari market.

Thus by the late 1930s, a community of Yorubas consisting of traders, workers, and artisans had evolved. The 1937 Kano Township population statistics estimated 1,547 Yoruba residents in Sabon Gari<sup>vii</sup> but by 1943, the number had increased to 2,148.<sup>viii</sup> As most of the Yoruba immigrants were traders they settled in areas near the Sabon Gari market. The most common goods they brought were kola nuts, salt, potassium and fruits which were exchanged for livestock, hides and skin, onions and pepper.<sup>ix</sup>

### ***The Nupe Community***

The Nupe, also known as Tapa or Takpa,<sup>x</sup> established their community in Sabon Gari Kano. The Nupe arrived simultaneously with the earliest Yorubas because of the long history of their cultural ties as well as political, military, and commercial relations which pre-date the 20th century. Nupe and Yoruba ethnic groups are linguistically related. They belong to the Kwa-group of West African languages.<sup>xi</sup> Nupe and Yoruba kingdoms developed from common political processes.

The political, cultural, and linguistic relations between the Yorubas and Nupes encouraged them to forge a common front in the coastal trade with the Europeans in the 19th century; and later they became employees of either the Lagos Colony, the Royal Niger Company, or the protectorate of Southern Nigeria. The relations between them also encouraged their immigration and settlement in Sabon Gari Kano during the colonial era. Thus even before the foundation of Sabon Gari Kano, the Yorubas and Nupes had immigrated and settled in the pre-colonial Kano City and founded Unguwar Ayagi, a ward which was predominantly inhabited by the Yorubas and some Nupes.<sup>xii</sup>

What accelerated the Nupe settlement in Sabon Gari Kano during the colonial era was the dislocation of Nupe indigenous economy and political life by colonial capitalism. A large number of Nupes came in search of opportunities.<sup>xiii</sup> Some others were demobilized soldiers of the West African Frontier Force who came to, or were settled in Kano after the time of British conquest in 1903. The growth in number of Nupe settlers went hand-in-hand with that of the Yorubas. The 1937 population statistics of Kano Township, which estimated 1,537 Yorubas, showed that there were 825 Nupes.<sup>xiv</sup> In 1942, Nupes were amongst the 10 major communities known to be residing in Sabon Gari.

One important feature of Nupe community is that it was initially founded in the same area with that of the Yorubas, that is, close to the Sabon Gari Market. The Nupes also built their Mosque in the middle of the Yoruba settlers in what is now No. 54 Ogbomosho Avenue. Another significant feature of Nupe community is that it was initially dominated by Nupe Muslim scholars such as Malam Ndako, Muhammadu Noibi Mai Dogon Gemu and Alhaji Mustapha Banufe.

### ***The Igbos and other Eastern Nigerian Settlers***

The Igbos also inhabited Sabon Gari in the early years of its establishment. These Igbos either worked with the regiments of the West African Frontier Force stationed in some parts of Northern Nigeria after the colonial conquests or participated in the construction of the Lagos-Kano railway line.<sup>xv</sup> However, unlike the Yorubas and Nupes, the Igbos did not inhabit Sabon Gari in large numbers until in the 1930s. The Kano Township population census of 1921, which estimated 1,478 Yorubas, 505 native foreigners and 220 Nupes, mentioned not a single Igbo resident in Sabon Gari,

The problem of communication between Eastern and Northern parts of Nigeria was what initially militated against the immigration of Igbos to Kano and other cities in Northern Nigeria. Unlike the Western part of Nigeria which was connected with the North in the period between 1896 and 1911 when the rail head from Lagos reached Kano via Kaduna and Zaria, serious efforts to connect the Eastern part of Nigeria with the North was not started until after the discovery of coal at Udi in 1908.<sup>xvi</sup>

The massive Igbo immigration into Sabon Gari Kano did not therefore start until after the completion of East-North railway line in 1932 when the Makurdi rail bridge (which for some years was the longest in Africa) was completed. Soon after the rail line from Port Harcourt was linked with Kano, the Igbos secured direct access to Kano. Commenting on the immigration and settlement of Igbos and other Nigerian peoples in Northern Nigeria, Edley writes:

*Even though the Igbo migration to Sabon Gari (Kano) and other Northern Nigerian cities began before the Eastern railway was opened...it was the improved means of transportation at the disposal of (Igbo) traders, that Kaduna, Zaria, and Kano became new focal points for their activities.<sup>xvii</sup>*

Large scale Igbo immigration to Kano and other Northern Nigerian cities was further necessitated by the density of population and shortage of land in Igbo land, The high incidence of population density, and the fact that the soil in several parts of Igbo land could only support subsistence agriculture, led many young Igbos to quest for alternative sources and means of livelihood outside their homeland. They migrated to the cities of the West and North, where they proved remarkably successful as clerks, railway workers, and storekeepers.<sup>xviii</sup>

The Igbos immigrated to all regions of Nigeria but especially the north which represented three-quarters of the country. They came in large numbers because, as Carey stated, subsistence agriculture in such areas as Owerri and Onitsha could not support the local population.<sup>xix</sup> In both Owerri and Onitsha much of the land is thickly forested and forest clearing was very difficult. In addition, Owerri and Onitsha were and are still amongst the areas with the heaviest population densities in West Africa.<sup>xx</sup> It is clear, then, that economic factors had an important influence on the settlement of the Igbo in Kano. Most of the Igbos who immigrated chose their new homes in areas where there were viable economic opportunities. Kano attracted a large number of Igbos throughout the colonial era because of job opportunities which were not available in Igboland.

Another important economic factor that pushed the Igbos to Kano was that before the discovery of oil in the eastern region in the late 1950s, palm produce was the chief economic resource in Igboland. Yet even this was not exploited by the colonial administration in ways that would benefit the ordinary people.<sup>xxi</sup> The Igbos soon after they immigrated became the most populous and economically prominent settlers. The Igbos occupied jobs in the colonial civil service and foreign (European) trading firms, and most of the junior posts in the colonial public service.

The Nigerian Railway department was one of the organizations they dominated. The Igbos also became some of the most prosperous traders in Sabon Gari market. They dominated the market because they were economically aggressive and crafty. The Igbos also became the most prominent transporters and contractors in Kano in the 1940s, due, mainly, to what my Yoruba informants regarded as the Igbos' segregationist and exclusivist tendencies.

The reality of the Igbo dominance was due to the activities of the Igbo Union, which played the role of enhancing community solidarity and making the Igbos to operate as an exclusivist community. The Union was started in 1938 by a group of prominent Igbos who wanted to establish a cultural organization to unite Igbo residents in Kano.<sup>xxii</sup> However, the union soon became an institution devoted to the preservation of Igbo interests. All Igbos in Sabon Gari and elsewhere in Kano Province identified themselves primarily with the Union. Moreover; unlike many other tribal Unions, the Igbo Union was extremely conservative and used a variety of tactics to get all Igbos within its fold. By 1960, the Igbo State Union had over 10,000 members in Sabon Gari Kano.<sup>xxiii</sup> Through the activities of the Igbo Union many Igbo residents became groundnut-buying agents to UAC, S. Raccah, A. J. Karons, and Leventis.

### ***Other Settlers***

Several other immigrant groups namely Ghanaians, Sierra Leonians, Cameroonians, Edo, Urhobo, and Idoma settled in Sabon Gari Kano alongside the earliest inhabitants. By 1954, the population of such immigrants was 21,624 as against only 9,218 in 1943.

### ***Hausa Settlers***

At the inception of Sabon Gari, the colonial government wanted to exclude Hausa-speaking peoples from residing or becoming plot-holders in the settlement. In the Political Memoranda, Lugard emphasized that: "Natives should as far as possible live in their own towns, under their own Chiefs and Native courts".<sup>xxiv</sup> In order to exclude Hausa speakers, the colonial government introduced a system of "Permit to reside". This system failed to control native immigrants. The 1921 decennial census shows that the Hausa-speaking people outnumbered any other single Southern Nigerian tribe in Sabon Gari Kano.<sup>xxv</sup> Similarly, the 1931 census report indicated that 37% of the population of all Sabon Garis in Northern Nigeria was Hausa-speaking.<sup>xxvi</sup>

The first Hausas to reside in Sabon Gari were demobilized members of the West African Frontier Force (WAFF). Then came the Hausa groundnut traders who were attracted to Kano by the groundnut boom. Many Hausas engaged in livestock trade settled in Sabon Gari in order to monopolize cattle trade. The Kano Township Annual Report of 1929 shows that two-third of cattle trade was in the hands of Hausa dealers and the remainder in the hands of Syrians.<sup>xxvii</sup> Many other Hausa-speakers settled in Sabon Gari in order to patronize trade in native products-potash, beans, groundnut oil, onions, etc. The Population statistics of the Township in 1937 estimated 1,903 Hausa residents in Sabon Gari as against 1,547 Yoruba and 1,529 Igbos.<sup>xxviii</sup> In 1938, there were 2040 Hausa, 4737 other Nigerians, and 842 non-Nigerians.<sup>xxix</sup> Indeed Hausa speakers of different backgrounds constituted a substantial proportion of Sabon Gari Kano population until 1953, when the Kano riot forced them to leave the area.

### ***Implications of Sabon Gari Settlements on Community Inter-relations***

The question could now be asked as to the role of the Sabon Gari in the relations between the stranger elements and the host community. Interestingly enough, it produced unfortunate consequences in northern Nigeria where they were established. It has created economic, political and educational polarity and effectively bred suspicions, it was not surprising therefore that the Sabon Gari became the melting pots of Northern Nigerian towns during the political crisis of later years. This same factor has generated numerous violent conflict, distrust and misunderstanding between the inhabitants and their hosts in different parts of Northern Nigeria. With this, indigenes perceived themselves as distinct from the inhabitants of Sabon Gari. The settlement also perpetuated separate communal values and perspectives and thereby inhibited the fostering of common national values. It has made non-indigenes especially inhabitants of Sabon Gari easy targets for ethnic and religious violence as in the Kano riots of 1953, 1966 and that of 1999.

The establishment of Sabon Gari and Tudun Wada according to two of my informants have negated the spirit of nationalism and integration. The Sabon Gari system has also consistently made it difficult for the migrant communities to be assimilated into their host's culture. The system has also prevented the indigenes from understanding the socio-cultural orientation of Sabon Gari settlers. This made it difficult for them to integrate with their host population and achieve peaceful co-existence and it has equally helped to deepened communal barriers.

Ordinarily, it might seem that the massive settlement and conglomeration of the population across ethnic, regional, and national boundaries in Sabon Gari would promote cultural contact and understanding among the various communities, however, socio-cultural barriers militated against integration.

The British colonial government for its own political and economic needs and interests encouraged each ethnic group to form Unions. Ward heads were also appointed by the colonial state for each of the communities. The ward heads were headmen for the colonial state, and they were responsible for maintaining peace and order.

Each tribal community was encouraged to preserve its ethnic identity. The Yoruba community formed several Yoruba based unions such as Egbe Omo Oduduwa, Ekiti Progressive Union, and Yoruba State Union. The Hausas formed the Hausa Community Association. Other ethnic Unions were Ibibio State Union, Idoma Tribal Union, and Ijaw Tribal Union. These Unions and Associations were the vehicles of maintaining links with the homeland and of maintaining cultural heritage. The Igbos who constituted more than 50% of the Sabon Gari Kano population at the end of the colonial era formed the Igbo State Union, which became the strongest ethnic union not only in Kano but Northern Nigeria as a whole. The union maintained a network of memberships throughout the country. In 1967, the Union was banned by Major General Ironsi in the wake of the January 15, 1966 coup because of its relationship with the NCNC.

Ethnic leaders were therefore the major actors of socio-political and economic affairs in Sabon Gari throughout the colonial era. Amongst the Yoruba Community for example, Alhaji Sani Giwa was one of the distinguished personalities. He was the first Olori (Chief) of the Yorubas, and when the Sabon Gari Mixed Court was established he represented the Yoruba community.

The significance of Ethnic leadership cannot be over stated. Ethnic leaders became the promoters and protectors of the political-cultural and economic interests of their followers. They also served as intermediaries between their members and local political authorities. As Onwubu argues, "the overriding ethnic loyalty which takes precedence over a Nigerian National identity operates to reinforce the sentiment attached to the ethnic homeland". Inter-ethnic marriages were thus unusual except among the new elite.

### ***Conclusion***

The colonial state from the experience of Sabon Gari Kano did not lay a solid foundation for ethnic and tribal harmony and integration. The failure was an important factor in our understanding of communal conflict which became rampant in Kano since 1953. The critical issue is not only that the colonial state failed to encourage ethnic community integration within Sabon Gari Communities, but has also failed to encourage socio-cultural integration and contact between Sabon Gari inhabitants and their host communities in Kano. The inhabitants of Sabon Gari do not inter-marry with the people of the city. They marry from within the settlement and from their home town/states. In addition, the children of Sabon Gari inhabitants except in very rare circumstances only attend primary schools located within the settlement, go to their home states for secondary, and post-secondary, education.

Moreover, in spite of the fact that a good number of Sabon Gari residents are Muslims, they still pray in their separate mosques. In essence, therefore, interaction between Sabon Gari and the various communities in Kano city has been minimal even at the level of religious activities.

### Endnotes

- <sup>i</sup> Sabon Gari literally means 'new town' or better still 'stranger's quarters'. For the origin of Sabon Gari system see the following materials; G. O. Olusanya, 'The Sabon Gari System in Northern States of Nigeria', in *Nigeria Magazine*, 1967, No. 94; A. D. Edley, 'The Sabon Gari System in Northern Nigeria: 1940', PhD Thesis, University College, Los Angeles, 1976; P. L. Nku, 'History of Sabon Gari Kano: From Colonial Period to 1978', B. A. History project, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, 1979; A. V. Dhilliwayo, 'The Colonial Framework of Urban Growth: The Case of Sabon Gari Zaria, 1911-1950: A Preliminary Survey', Dept of History Seminar, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, 1980; C. N. Ubah, 'The Political Dilemma of Residential Segregation: The Example of Nigeria's Kano Sabon Gari', *African Urban Studies*, No. 14, Fall, 1982; E. Dusai, 'The Edo Immigrants in Kano: 1912-1975', M. A. Dissertation, Bayero University, Kano, 1986; I. O. Albert, 'Urban Migrant Settlements in Nigeria: A Historical Comparison of the Sabon Garis in Kano and Ibadan, 1893-1991', PhD Thesis, University of Ibadan, 1993; A. Bako and M. T. Usman, 'Colonialism and the Growth of the Sabon Gari System in the Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Kano', in *Degel*, Journal of the Faculty of Arts and Islamic Studies, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, Vol. II, September, 1999; A. Bako, *Sabon Gari Kano: A History of Immigrants and Inter-Group Relations in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, Sokoto, University Press, 2006.
- <sup>ii</sup> J. N. Paden, *Religion and Political Culture in Kano*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973, p. 315
- <sup>iii</sup> C. N. Ubah, "The Political Dilemma of Residential segregation: The Example of Nigeria's Kano Sabon Gari", *African Urban Studies*, No. 14, 1982, p. 175.
- <sup>iv</sup> NAK Kanoprof 6118, Wage Advisory Council: Sabon Gari Kano Board, 1940-1949, p. 63.
- <sup>v</sup> Paden, *Religion and Political ...*, p. 315.
- <sup>vi</sup> NAK Kanoprof 4292, Report on Native Reservation Kano Township, p. 6
- <sup>vii</sup> NAK Kanoprof 6116, Sabon Gari Kano: Administration of, p. 5
- <sup>viii</sup> NAK Tribal Statistics of Sabon Gari Kano, 115A, 1943, p. 2.
- <sup>ix</sup> M. Adamu, *The Hausa Factor in West African History*, Zaria; Ahmadu Bello University Press, 178, p. 60; also Y. A. Lasisi, "Gusau in the 20th Century: The Case of Hausa-Yoruba Relations", B. A. History, University of Sokoto, 1988, p. 16.
- <sup>x</sup> S. F. Nadel, *A Black Byzantium: The Kingdom of Nupe in Nigeria*, London: Oxford University Press, 1973, p. 10.
- <sup>xi</sup>
- <sup>xii</sup> N. Perchnock, "Occupation and Residence in Kano City", Unpublished Seminar Paper, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, 1976, p. 5.
- <sup>xiii</sup> A. D. Sani, "Migrants in Kaduna Metropolis: A Case of the Nupe", Unpublished B. A. Project, University of Sokoto, 1988, p. 10.
- <sup>xiv</sup> NAK Kanoprof 6115 Sabon Gari Kano, p. 3
- <sup>xv</sup> D. J. M. Muffett, *Concerning Brave Captains: Being an Account of the British Occupation of Kano and Sokoto and of the last strand of the Fulani Forces.*, London: Andre Deutsch, 1964, p. 174.
- <sup>xvi</sup> W. I. Ofonagoro, *Trade and Imperialism in Southern Nigeria, 1881-1929*, Lagos: Nole Publishers, 1979, p. 210.
- <sup>xvii</sup> A. D. Edley, "The Sabon Gari System in Northern Nigeria: 1911-1940", PhD History University of California Los Angeles, 1976, p. 269.
- <sup>xviii</sup> D. Stanley, *Nigeria: Model of Colonial Failure*, New York, 1967, p. 43.
- <sup>xix</sup> R. D. Carrey, "Church-Sponsored Education and National Development in Nigeria", Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Stanford University, 1969, p. 45.
- <sup>xx</sup> C. A. Alkach, *West Africa: A General Certificate Geography*, London; University of London, 1993, p. 127.
- <sup>xxi</sup> C. Onwubu, Ethnic Identity, Political Integration, and National Development: The Igbo Diaspora in Nigeria" *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 13, 1975, p. 105.
- <sup>xxii</sup> G. A. Ayandele, *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria 1842-1914: A Political and Social Analysis*, London, 1966, p. 17.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Nigeria Citizen Newspaper, No. 653, 1958, p. 12.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> F. D. Lugard, *Political Memoranda: Revision of Instructions to Political Officers on subjects chiefly Political and administrative 1913 - 1918*, London: Frank Cass, 1970, p. 147.
- <sup>xxv</sup> C. K. Meek, *The Northern Tribes of Nigeria: An Ethnographical account of the Northern Provinces of Nigeria together with a report on 1921 decennial census*, London: Frank Cass, 1971, p. 176.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> A. D. Edley, "The Sabon Gari System in Northern Nigeria: 1911-1940", PhD History University of California Los Angeles, 1976, p. 291.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> C. K. Meek, *The Northern Tribes of Nigeria: An Ethnographical account of the Northern Provinces of Nigeria together with a report on 1921 decennial census*, London: Frank Cass, 1971, p. 273.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> NAK Kanoprof 6115 Sabon Gari Kano, p. 6.

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<sup>xxix</sup> A. Frishman, "The Spatial Growth and Residential Location Pattern of Kano, Nigeria", Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Northwestern University, 1977, p. 134.

<sup>xxx</sup> This result has been foreseen by late Chief O. Awolowo as far back as 1947 when he stated 'Southerners who go to the North to work or trade have to be segregated, whereas Hausas are free to mix as much as they wish in the South. The seed for a future minority problem in the north has been sown by the Government. It will grow with growing political consciousness on the part of those who settle permanently in the north. When the bitter harvest comes to be reaped, as surely it must, unless the policy is changed, the British Government should bear the blame'. O. Awolowo, *Path to Nigerian Freedom*, Faber and Faber Ltd, 1947, p. 52.

<sup>xxxix</sup> Danfuloti claimed that some Hausa parents in Gusau hated their children to associate with children brought up in Sabon Gari. They equated any deviant behavior to an upbringing in Sabon Gari. For more details see Y. A. Danfuloti, 'Religious Leadership and Political Stability in Nigeria: A Tentative Assessment of the Attitude of Sultan Abubakar III', Seminar Paper Presented at the University of Ibadan, 2-26 October, 1990, pp. 4-5 and p. 14. See his endnotes No. 9

<sup>xxxii</sup> I. O. Albert, *Inter-Ethnic Relations in a Nigerian City: A Historical Perspective of the Igbo-Hausa Conflicts in Kano, 1953-1991*, Ibadan Institute of French Research in Africa, 1993, p. 2.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Oral interviews with Alh. Aliyu Guraguri, 42 years old, Sole Administrator Gusau Local Government, 8<sup>th</sup> April, 1999 and Alh. Yahuza Gebe, 44 years old, Sole Administrator, Tsafe Local Government, 8<sup>th</sup> April, 1999. They were both interviewed in Gusau.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> D. A. Abdulrahman, 'Ethnic Violence in Nigeria', Paper Presented at the National Conference on Social Sciences and Administration in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, June 2001, p. 9.

<sup>xxxv</sup> C. Onwubu, Ethnic Identity, Political Integration, and National Development: The Igbo Diaspora in Nigeria" *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 13, 1975, pp. 411-412.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> O. J. Ojiako, *Thirteen Years of Military Rule: 1966-1979* A Daily Times Publication, 1979, p. 18.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> C. Onwubu, Ethnic Identity, Political Integration, and National Development: The Igbo Diaspora in Nigeria" *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 13, 1975, p. 406.